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## ANOTHER VIEW OF SPENSER'S LINGUISTICS

BY F. F. COVINGTON, JR.

In an article entitled "Spenser's Linguistics in the Present State of Ireland," (Mod. Phil., Jan. 1920), J. W. Draper has confirmed the opinion of those who have read Spenser's prose tract that the poet's knowledge of the science of language was very limited. By a detailed study of the words relating in various ways to Ireland and etymologized by Spenser in the "View" Draper has shown that Spenser has exhibited a tendency to allow his fancy to usurp the place of accurate knowledge of the Celtic languages and the laws of derivation, branches of knowledge in which he was conspicuously deficient. Draper, however, has allowed himself some liberties in his treatment of the subject which, it seems to me, strict fairness to Spenser must call in question. At least two of the studies of the words used by Spenser involve an important principle which must be taken into consideration in any study of a work the text of which has not been definitely established.

Throughout his article Draper seems to assume that the Globe (Morris) text is the final authority not only for Spenser's own words, but for his individual orthography. This is an exceedingly risky assumption, in view of the facts: (1) that Morris does not claim that his text is authoritative (See Preface); (2) that the Lambeth MS, upon which Grosart bases his text of the "View," and which, according to the same authority, is "the copy submitted by the Author to the Archbishop of Canterbury for License,"<sup>1</sup> differs often both in wording and spelling from the Globe; (3) that Ware's, the first printed text,<sup>2</sup> agrees with neither of these two throughout, and sometimes differs from both.

In his study of the word *gaull* Draper bases his discussion upon the presence of a -u- in a word that is normally spelled *gall*. "*Gaull*, he says, is Irish for 'straunge inhabitaunt' . . . There is a word *gall*, meaning *foreign*, in Irish; and the introduction of

<sup>1</sup> The Complete Works . . . of E. Spenser, ed. Grosart, vol. ix, "Note," p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ancient Irish Histories, Dublin, 1809. (Reptd. from Ware's ed., 1633).

the -u- may show either that Spenser took advantage of Elizabethan license in spelling to enforce his etymologies, or that he was trying to reproduce an Irish dialectic pronunciation *goul*, or merely that he had chanced upon that spelling in Irish." Any one of these suppositions is allowable, no doubt, if Spenser spelled the word with a -u-; but if it can be shown that the probabilities are strongly against Spenser's having used such a spelling, the whole discussion is pointless. The evidence is against Draper's contention. In Grosart's text the word is spelled *gald*, and it is so spelled in Ware (to which fact, by the way, Draper calls attention in a foot-note, apparently without noting its significance). Furthermore, Buchanan, upon whom Spenser leaned heavily in these matters, has the form GALD in a passage bearing directly upon this point. I quote part of chapter XXVIII, book II, of his *Rerum Scotticarum Historia*:

"Hae autem tres nationes [i. e., the Britons, the Picts, and the Scots], totum Britanniae latus, quod ad Hiberniam vergit, tenent; nec levia indicia, sed penitus inustas notas Gallici sermonis & cognationis adhuc servant. Illud autem in primis, quod Scoti prisci, omnes nationes, quae Britanniam incolunt, in duo genera partiuntur: alteros GAEL, alteros GALLE, sive GALD, appellant; hoc est, (ut ego quidem interpretor,) *Gallaecos*, & *Gallos*. . . Vox enim GALLE, aut GALD, non est minus apud eos significans quam apud Graecos & Latinos Barbarus, apud Germanos WALSCH."<sup>3</sup>

To which may be added in further confirmation the following passage from Campion's "Historie of Ireland," which Spenser had almost certainly read: "It is further to be known, that the simple Irish are utterly another people then our Englishe in Ireland, whom they call despitefully *boddai Sassoni's* and *boddai Ghalt*, that is, English and Saxon churles."<sup>4</sup>

On the same page Draper discusses the word *farrih*, a war cry, which Spenser thinks is of Scottish derivation, on account of its resemblance to the name of one of the "first kings of Scotland called Fargus, Fergus, or Ferragus." This derivation is "fanciful" enough, but not, I believe, so fanciful as Draper considers it;

<sup>3</sup> Ed. Ruddiman, Leyden, 1725.

<sup>4</sup> Ware's ed., 1809, page 20, (first published 1571.)

for it is more than likely that Spenser wrote not *farrih*, but *ferragh*, a form certainly closer to "Fargus, Fergus, and Ferragus" than *farrih*. In this instance again the spelling of the Globe text seems inaccurate. Both Grosart<sup>5</sup> and Ware<sup>6</sup> print *ferragh*. But there is stronger testimony than textual. The evidence as to the *sound* of this war cry tends to show that the spelling in Ware and Grosart more closely approximates it than that in the Globe. Campion in his account of this cry has *faro*; <sup>7</sup> and Todd's note on this passage in the "View" tends to confirm my contention:<sup>8</sup> "The vulgar Irish supposed the subject of this war song to have been *Forroch* or *Ferragh* (an easy corruption of *Pharroh* which Selden, in his note on Drayton's *Polyolbion*, says was the name of the war song once in use amongst the Irish kernes), a terrible giant, of whom they tell many a marvellous tale. . . ."<sup>9</sup>

In his discussion of a third word involving the question of orthography Draper charges Spenser, by implication, with carelessness (or capriciousness at least), when the carelessness is his own. On page 119 of his article we read: "The third of the legal terms is 'tanistih,' usually spelled *tanistry*, the custom of choosing the successor of a chief during his lifetime from any member of his family." But "Tanistih" in the Globe text is the man, the tanist, not the custom, which is spelled *Tanistrye* consistently, except in one passage, where the juxtaposition of the two words, probably, was responsible for the form *Tanistrih*. It is strange that Draper should have overlooked such passages as these, both on the page from which he cites the word, and the preceding. For on page 611 the Globe text reads: ". . . for all the Irishe doe holde theyr landes by Tanistrye; which is, (as they say) noe more then a personall estate for his life time, that is, Tanistih, by reason that he is admitted therunto by election of the countrey."

"What is this that you call Tanistih and Tanistrye?" And on page 612, to which Draper refers, we find: "But how is the Tanistih chosen?" "And so it may well be that from the first

<sup>5</sup> P. 90, Grosart's ed.

<sup>6</sup> P. 92, Ware's ed., 1809.

<sup>7</sup> *Historie of Ireland*, Ware's ed., 1809, p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> *Works of E. Spenser*, ed. Todd, 1805, vol. VIII, p. 372.

<sup>9</sup> Todd also cites Warton's note on *Sir Ferragh*, F. Q. iv. ii. 4, *ibid.* Warton might have added F. Q. iv. iv. 8.

originall of this woord Tanistih and Tanistrih came . . . " Grosart<sup>10</sup> and Ware,<sup>11</sup> it may be noted, have *tanist*, the usual form.

It is not a matter of vast importance, of course, whether Spenser spelled these words one way or the other; the establishing of his own spelling could do little towards rehabilitating his etymologies. But it is a matter of importance to realize that we cannot be certain how Spenser spelled them, and not to speculate overmuch about, or build theories upon, word-forms insufficiently attested by textual or manuscript authority.

The next point upon which I must take issue with Draper lies in a matter of interpretation. After showing the weakness of Spenser's derivation of *palatine* (pages 114-115), Draper continues: "In like manner his derivation of *Scot* seems fanciful. He takes it from the Greek 'scotos,' which he defines as 'darkeness,' At least he seems right in that it is very likely not a Gaelic word." Draper then proceeds with an etymological discussion, and concludes with the opinion that Spenser's derivation "is probably guessed from a chance similarity." The derivation is indeed fanciful; in fact, I believe it was too fanciful even for Spenser. Surely if the sentence is read in its context it will be clear that in this passage Spenser is trying to make a joke; the only one in the "View," and, as might be expected, a rather feeble one. Eudoxus, one of the speakers of the dialogue, after ridiculing Stanihurst, a writer on Ireland, for his attempt to connect the derivation of the name "Scotts" with one "Scota, the daughter of Pharaoh," which he calls a "senceless fable," proceeds: ". . . for whether Scota be an Aegyptian woord or smacke of any learning or judgement, lett the learned judge. But this Scota rather cometh of the Greeke *scotos*, that is, darkness, which hath not lett him see the light of the trueth."

Irenaeus, the other speaker, replies: "You knowe not, Eudoxus, how well Mr. Stanihurst could see in the darke; perhaps he hath owles or cats eyes, but well I wote he seeth not well the light of the trueth in matters of more waight."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The Complete Works . . . . of E. Spenser, ed. Grosart, vol. ix, pp. 21, 22, 23, *et passim*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ancient Irish Histories*, Dublin, 1809, vol. i, pp. 10, 11, 12, *et passim*.

<sup>12</sup> P. 633, Globe ed.

At any rate, it seems only fair to give Spenser the benefit of the doubt. It is not my purpose, however, to attempt a defense of Spenser's linguistic vagaries. Draper has discussed them with acuteness and learning, and merits the thanks of all students of that poet for the light he has thrown on the working of the poet's mind when it was concerned with questions of scholarship outside the traditionally prescribed field. Spenser's knowledge of the Celtic languages and of philological science was, it is true, "sadly narrow." But this sad condition was rather common among educated men of his time; and, as Draper says, we must not "lay too much blame upon Spenser for this miscomprehension." Nor should we allow his errors in questions of ethnology (some of which Draper notices in his article) to arouse a feeling of contempt for the poet of the "Faerie Queene" as a mere blunderer in unfamiliar provinces of knowledge, and so blind us to the real value of his methods in the "View." Elton,<sup>13</sup> a well-known ethnologist, pays a high tribute to Spenser's originality in the field of ethnology. Perhaps, considering the "View" in its broader aspects, we may say not inaccurately of its author as he says of the Irish chroniclers, that he errs "in the circumstances, not in the matter."

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<sup>13</sup> *Origins of English History*, 2d. ed. rev., pp. 157-158.